

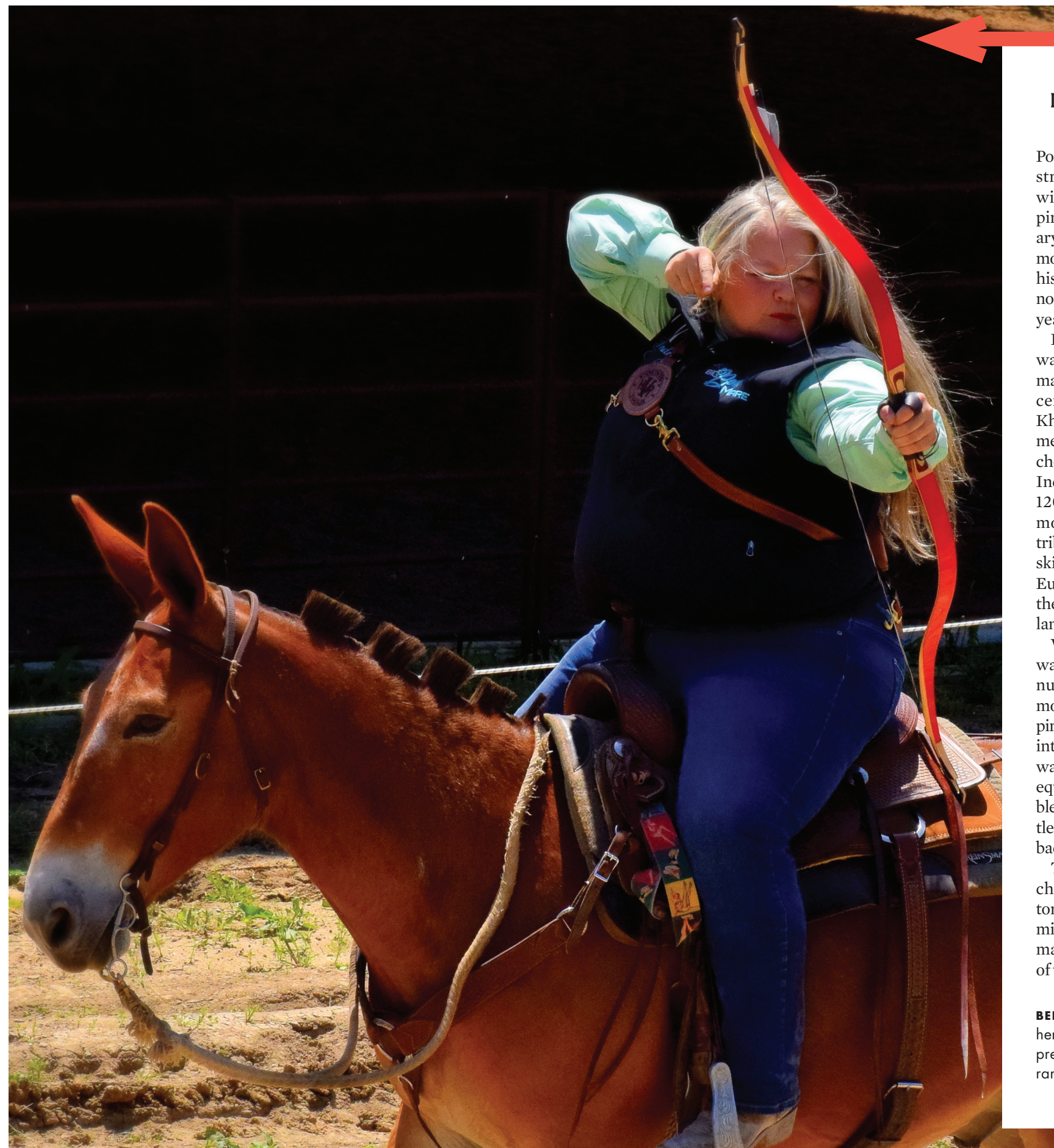
Hitting New Targets After Age



STORY BY ANNA SOCHOCKY

Diagnosed with choroid melanoma in the left eye at age 62, Marcy Bilynsky was advised by her doctor to get her life in order. Instead, she took aim at a second chance with the help of her horse, a bow and an arrow.

Marcy Bilynsky's 30-year career as a post-traumatic stress disorder unit manager, and later in suicide prevention at a Kansas Veterans Administration hospital, afforded her the grit to confront a life-threatening cancer diagnosis. A decision to thrive, not simply survive, emboldened Bilynsky to take up the reins again, this time with a bow and a quiver of arrows by her side.



HOOFPRIENTS PAVE HISTORY'S PATH LEADING TO A REVIVAL

Pounding hooves strike the earth. Horses strain to move at lightning speed. The wind whistles past the rider's ears. Empires rose and fell at the hands of legendary mounted archers. The martial art of mounted archery boasts a rich and ancient history beginning in Central Asia, where nomadic tribes domesticated horses 5,000 years ago.

Huns, Avars and Mughals spread their warfare on horseback, invading Europe many times in the fourth, sixth and ninth centuries. Mongolian leader Chinggis Khan, also known as Ghengis Khan, cemented the military acumen of equine archers, marking major victories in China, India, Russia and Eastern Europe in the 1200s. Alexander the Great recruited mounted archers among the Scythian tribe, purported to be legendary for their skill. Ottoman invaders pushed deep into Europe during the modern age, reaching the gates of Vienna and crossing into Poland, Hungary and the Balkans.

Women warriors factored into mounted warfare tactics, too. Qutlugh Nigar Khanum, a direct descendant of Khan and mother to the founder of the Mughal Empire of India, purportedly followed her son into battle with a bow and arrow. Female warriors in Scythian culture cut a path to equality with men because of their notable skills. Women warriors who fell in battle were buried with weapons and horseback riding equipment.

The resurgence of interest in equine archery resides in modern-day competitors, trainers and women over 60 driving minivans. Mounted archery emerged for many older women looking for a revival of their own.

BELOW: Von Holten draws an arrow from her quiver after dropping her reins and prepares to aim at the next target on the ranch's equine archery course.



A PERFECT STORM

Brandy Von Holten says she's always been an overachiever, setting and reaching new goals 10 miles faster than someone else working at total capacity. Considering she's an equine entrepreneur, martial arts champion, children's book author and ranch owner, conversations with Von Holten surge, pivot and cover more ground than a seasoned pack mule. Laughter is a constant, as are nuggets of inspiration.

"I had a rough childhood but have come out of it," Von Holten says. "I'm the first person in my family to go to college, but then I overdid it. I have a degree in biology with a minor in physics, a degree in criminal justice, and my master's is in teaching."

Born in Texas and raised in Arkansas, Von Holten moved to Missouri to train as a heavyweight fighter for the Olympics.

"I did full contact fighting for 23 years," Von Holten says. "I fought in five countries and won national and international medals. I met my husband and decided to stay."

After her last competitive fight in 2013, Von Holten and her husband, David, purchased the family farm. However, the 100-year-old, 300-acre ranch had laid fallow and unoccupied for 30 years. Von Holten and her husband used a chainsaw to cut through the hedge on the central road and cleared junked cars, rusting combines, old wagon wheels, milk jugs and acres of trash. Of the eight buildings on the land, only one was salvageable — the chicken coop.

Clearing the past made way for the future. Today, the Von Holten ranch operates 25 miles of trails and camping sites, a mountain trail obstacle course for riders, a wedding and event venue, 94 covered stalls and Von Holten's ultimate dream: an outdoor mounted archery track.

THE ULTIMATE IN MULTITASKING

Mounted archery has a home for everyone, according to Von Holten, but beginners may feel like a monkey

trying to navigate a cellphone. Traditional stationary archery uses a two or three-finger draw to shoot. In mounted archery, the thumb releases the arrow. Equine archery draws on every part of the body. The legs and seat control the horse. The upper body, arms and shoulders execute the archery. In essence, equine archery is multitasking.

Von Holten integrates levels of difficulty in her private lessons and competitive events ranging from stationary shooting and shooting targets on the ground or mounted, as well as shooting at a trot or canter.

"You're competing against yourself because you're trying to improve your accuracy," Von Holten says. "You're trying to improve your speed. I have mounted archers that are never going to canter. I have mounted archers whose goals are just on stationary horses."

ABOVE: Instruction begins on the ground, learning to draw an arrow from the quiver and nocking it in the bow using a thumb release.



Von Holten enjoys working with older women because of their commitment to improving their skills, mindset and physical condition.

"They're willing to put in the work it takes to become a good archer," Von Holten says. "Older women want to get extremely good at drawing the arrow, getting on their horse and releasing it."

Champion international archer, expert artisan bowyer, clinician, and co-founder and former president of the Mounted Archery Association of the Americas-MA3, Lukas Novotny, who witnessed the revival of contemporary mounted archery as a martial art in the 1990s and was a clinician at Von Holten's ranch in 2017, agrees.

"Men get frustrated because they try to force their will on the horse," Novotny says. "So many things can go wrong: The horse can get spooked, launch forward, exit the course, change your gait in the middle of your shot, or break stride. You have to develop a relationship with the horse. Men forget that the horse is not a car where you can push a pedal and control its speed."

FOCUSING ON A NEW TARGET

Photographer Helen K. Garber is recognized for her night urban landscapes in Los Angeles and New York, U.S.; Paris, France; and Venice, Italy. Her images are in permanent museums, corporations and private collections.

As with many children, Garber's first introduction to horses and archery came at summer camp. However, being a small child in Brooklyn, New York, meant the only horses accessible were on the end of a stick and at the Coney Island merry-go-round.

"We had a full basement with a ping-pong table and some plastic kids' record player," Garber says. "I would put on the player and gallop around with a horse head on a stick."

Eventually, Garber moved to Southern California, where she met her husband, Stuart. Their decision to relocate to New Mexico and search for a horse ranch cemented Garber's long-held dreams. With three horses and a property in Santa Fe's equestrian community today, Garber's op-

portunity to learn about mounted archery came during the international COVID-19 pandemic.

"I saw an ad on a Facebook group about a mounted archery clinic in Albuquerque," Garber says. "The clinic was outside, so my husband and I went."

Working as a professional photographer, Garber says her whole life has been a competition to land a job, secure a gallery spot or sell artwork.

"I am 69, and all I want to do is have fun," Garber says. "I have a three-acre enclosure for my horses and lots of trees. I bought some paper targets, hung them in different trees and just played."

TOP LEFT: Building one's mental strength and confidence by setting and meeting goals is central to Von Holten's Chix in the Sticks and spreads to other parts of students' lives. **TOP RIGHT:** Instruction transitions to the saddle. Von Holten guides a rider at the Elkhorn Clinic.





RETIREMENT FOR RIDERS AND HORSES SOARS

Accomplished Florida three-day eventer Connie Claire discovered mounted archery after a trip to the Kentucky Horse Park with her husband.

“My husband and I saw Lukas Novotny come out at a gallop and shoot multiple arrows during a demonstration,” Claire says. “I was ending my eventing career. I was getting older, and the jumps were a bit much.”

Witnessing Novotny thunder down a 90-meter line, Claire figured, “I can ride the canter in a straight line. I bet I could learn to shoot with a bow and arrow.” A conversation with Novotny led to private lessons, his handcrafted Saluki bows purchased, and a lasting friendship.

According to Claire, Novotny, who trained as a glass artist in his former Czechoslovakia, founded the Saluki Bow Company in 1998 and became a full-time bowyer, crafting bows that are pieces of art.

“His bows are almost like a musical instrument because they’re so strong and so true,” says Claire, who began mounted archery 12 years ago. “We’ve traveled all over the world with him, and it’s been a wonderful ride.”

Claire trains and practices with Archer Point Riders, a mounted archery program based in Dunnellon, Florida. Though open to anyone of all ages,

the club blossomed with women over 60. One member of the Archer Point Riders group who came last year is 80. Many riders retired from competition and boasted decades of horse experience.

“Many women have old retired show horses, so they’ve got great relationships with their horse,” Claire says. “When they introduce their horse to the sport, they do great. You want a calm horse that doesn’t get riled. You want them to be able to stay calm while you’re shooting off of him and not pick up speed with the reins dropped.”

Mounted archery incorporates a path of milestones for both the rider and the horse, according to Claire.

“You start at the walk, move to the trot and go to the canter,” Claire says. “There are milestones, like learning to release the reins, canter and shoot. When you start competing, you have to have intensity because you’re on a galloping horse and want to quickly shoot, but you have to have Zen control in your mind. You have to be focused on your target and let everything else go by.”

FROM A KNEE REPLACEMENT TO MONGOLIA 2023

Claire underwent knee replacement surgery nine months before the 2023 International Horseback Archery Alliance World Championship in

Mongolia. The same year, Claire turned 60 and qualified to compete.

The international competition hosted more than 80 competitors from 24 countries from September 4-10. Shepherds tended flocks of sheep, goats and yaks outside competition fencing. Yurts sprout like cities. Natural tracks dug in the earth proved to be rough and uneven. Climbing on a Mongolian pony or horse tested the riders’ mettle, but Claire said it was challenging to step out of her comfort zone and experience an international competition.

“The Mongolians and other competitors were so kind,” Claire says.

The French team won first place, followed by the Mongolian and Kazakhstan groups, but for Claire, galloping and shooting targets in Mongolia was the experience of a lifetime.

TOP LEFT: Horse woman and successful three-day eventer Connie Claire riding Leo, ranks 10th in the United States and 43rd in the world among equine competitive equine archers. **TOP**

CENTER: Sonja Weiss Haught takes her time shooting off her mount, Playboy’s Ginnin Buck, to improve her accuracy.

TOP RIGHT: Regular practice hones competition skills. Pat Hayden and Mr. Pibb storm the next target aiming for a bull’s-eye.

LIFE 2.0

A self-described military brat, Bilynsky watched her parents become competitive archers while living in England.

“I loved being out in nature,” Bilynsky recalls. “My parents would go out into the woods and practice shooting. I always wanted to do it but never did.”

Fascinated with videos of Mongolian archers flying at a high rate of speed and shooting multiple arrows in seconds, all from the back of a horse, Bilynsky’s interest soared.

“Mounted archery is quiet, and it’s something you do outside,” Bilynsky says. “When you’re on a moving horse, it’s like flying.”

Losing sight in one eye due to the choroid melanoma disrupted Bilynsky’s depth perception but not her will, leading her to retrain her sight line by changing how to gauge the location of the targets.

“If I’m riding my horse down the center of the arena, I think I’m straight, but I’ll always be 3 feet off to the right,” Bilynsky says. “I have to adjust to compensate and look for land markers to figure out my position. Once when I was shooting, Brandy had other items out in her arena to target, including a rubber cow. I shot it through the head, which I wasn’t supposed to do. It was a decoration. Brandy comes up carrying this cow, laughing, and said, ‘I just got this!’”

Mounted archery allowed Bilynsky’s self-confidence to blossom when her health was seriously jeopardized. Horses, always a constant in her life, helped her to step back from thinking about the diagnosis and regroup.

“Equine archery came at a really good time for me,” Bilynsky says. “The survival rate for choroid melanoma is pretty bad, and a year later, I was diagnosed with kidney cancer. When I ride, I don’t think about anything other than riding.”

A firm believer in the impact of horses on people and their emotions, Bilynsky was shepherded by horses through grueling cancer treatments.



Diagnosed at 62 and not expected to live past 65, Bilynsky credits mounted archery for a second chance at life.

“Mounted archery is pretty empowering,” Bilynsky says. “It’s nice to know I can still do things to keep me moving.”

CHIX IN THE STICKS

Of Von Holten’s clients, 85% are women ready for a new goal and challenge after raising families and charting successful careers. Hence, molding the business around women made economic sense for Von Holten. An event called Chix in the Sticks, an all-inclusive, woman-only equine vacation, reaches maximum capacity with each offering.

“I always do a mounted archery demonstration at Chix in the Sticks,” Von Holten says. “They might have dabbled in archery, but whenever their kids come on, they don’t get to be the horse person they were before, or that fear sets in. What if I get hurt? Who’s going to take care of the children? Many of my archers are women with kids who have graduated high school, and they’re in college and think, ‘Wait, I used to be cool. I want to do something for me.’”

Goals are obtained through consistency, and consistency beats talent. Von Holten notes that women in their 50s, 60s, and 70s developed a strong work ethic over many decades. In Von Holten’s view, work ethic always beats talent.

“Mounted archery is sexy, okay?” Von Holten says. “And it’s unique. And not everybody does it. But mounted archery has a home for everybody.”

CLOSING

Expertise in martial arts assured natural hand-eye coordination for Von Holten, but she shot a bull’s-eye the first time she let an arrow fly from the back of a horse.

“I thought I had found my sport,” Von Holten says. “I didn’t find it. I feel like it found me.”

Von Holten’s goals multiply like a hayfield after a monsoon rain. Hosting the most decorated archers with the Mounted Association of the Americas-MA3 whet her appetite. Her goal is to be a global leader in the mounted archery community.

“I want to become a global leader in bringing mounted archery to the United States,” Von Holten says. “Most mounted archery participants are on the East Coast and West Coast. We put in the most amazing mounted archery course, spending more than \$10,000. You remember that ‘Field of Dreams’ movie? ‘Build it, and they will come.’” 🐾

ABOVE: New Mexico-based international competitor and clinician Trey Schlichting moves with Helen Garber and her horse, Gunner, coaching her during early lessons in equine archery.